

Urban Wildlife Damage Abatement and Control Grant Application

Plan / Project Information

Project Area and Geographical Extent of the Damage

The La Crosse Bluffland Preservation Area is a forested upland encompassing 3,000 acres from County Trunk Highway B to the north to State Highway 35/U.S. Highways 14/61 on the south. Of this 3,000 acres, 1,099 are protected. The City of La Crosse owns the 800-acre Hixon Forest, a public greenspace, and the rest of the protected property is managed by the Mississippi Valley Conservancy (MVC). Some of landowners that hold 1,901 acres within the Blufflands Protection Area allow deer hunting and some do not. Deer hunting is allowed on some parcels of MVC-managed land as well, but no deer hunting is allowed in Hixon Forest.

Due to the high density of deer throughout the forested blufflands, biological damage is extensive. Moreover, residential areas lie within, or adjacent to, the entire eight-mile length of the bluffs, and deer browse is widespread on properties within four city blocks of the forest boundary.

La Crosse City Ordinances Regarding Firearms and Bows and Arrows

The City of La Crosse has ordinances addressing the discharge of firearms and the use of bows and arrows within city limits. In both cases, a person must obtain written consent from the Chief of Police before the use of either one of these possibly dangerous weapons. (A copy of the ordinance is included in the attachments.) If the Board of Park Commissioners decides to endorse the option of a managed hunt within city limits, the Parks and Recreation Department will need a City Council resolution, as well as a DNR permit, to hold a special hunt.

Additional Plan / Project-Specific Information

Public Input

At the October 2007 meeting of the La Crosse Board of Park Commissioners, Wisconsin DNR senior wildlife biologist Ron Lichtie delivered a presentation on the aerial deer survey he conducted on March 6th, 2007 on the blufflands in and adjacent to La Crosse. This meeting was open to the public, and community members' comments were welcomed. In the spring of 2008 the Deer Control Sub-committee plans to hold two public hearings on the subject of urban deer management in La Crosse.

Need for Urban Wildlife Control

According to Mr. Lichtie, the aerial survey indicated that the blufflands in and adjacent to La Crosse have an estimated population of 82 to 116 deer per square mile—ten times the number that a healthy forest can support. The high density of whitetails has resulted in extensive biological degradation. Gone are the trilliums, bluebells, and other spring ephemerals. Gone are the bur oak saplings and basswood seedlings. Gone, in fact, are over 60 native plants. In their place is a thick assemblage of buckthorn, black locust, and Amur and Tatarian honeysuckle. The heavy presence of these exotic species, the large areas of exposed soil, the high numbers of buck-rubbed trees—all indicate a forest in poor condition due to deer damage.

Among those city residents who live adjacent to the bluffs, it is widely known that one cannot grow a vegetable garden or cultivate ornamental plants. Deer commonly leave the forested bluffs at night and browse the vegetation in people's yards. Deer even cross Losey Boulevard, one of the city's busiest streets, and deer/auto collisions are becoming more frequent.

La Crosse Bluffland Preservation Program

In 2006 La Crosse County authorized a DNR-managed deer hunt at Goose Island, a public park and camping area near La Crosse. Of the 37 whitetails harvested, the adults averaged 40 pounds below normal weight. Also, half of the deer showed high levels of liver flukes. It is likely that the deer in the La Crosse Bluffland Preservation Area suffer from similar problems of underweight and high levels of parasites.

Deer Population Monitoring Procedures

On March 6, 2007 the DNR conducted an aerial deer survey of the bluffs in and adjacent to La Crosse. Flying in a Schweizer 333 helicopter, DNR senior wildlife biologist Ron Lichtie and DNR assistant Carrie Milestone conducted the census in ideal weather conditions, with overcast skies and 10 inches of fresh snow cover. Using an observation rate of 50% to 70%, the surveyors estimated that the forested bluffs have a deer population of 82 to 116 per square mile.

Desired Population Goal

The population goal for the La Crosse Bluffland Preservation Area, a number established with public input, is ten (10) deer per square mile. Reaching this goal will require a sustained, community-wide effort that includes the cooperation of bluff-area landowners, city residents, the Mississippi Valley Conservancy, the Hixon Forest Nature Center, the City Council, and the DNR.

Personnel, Planning, and Coordination

In order to develop an urban deer management plan for La Crosse, the Board of Park Commissioners has established a deer control sub-committee that includes city council members, Park Board officers, DNR senior wildlife biologist Ron Lichtie, and representatives from the Mississippi Valley Conservancy, the Hixon Forest Nature Center, and Human Powered Trails. This committee plans to consult with DNR wildlife managers and other experts who have experience in organizing and facilitating urban deer abatement programs. For example, the committee plans to speak with Fred Strand, a DNR wildlife manager from Superior, who, working with volunteers from the Wisconsin Whitetail Bowhunters Association (WWBA), has conducted for five years an archery

La Crosse Bluffland Preservation Program

hunt within the Superior city limits. Of special interest to the committee is how Mr. Strand works out the logistics of this hunt with the WWBA, with residents who live near the hunting areas, with municipal police officers, with the DNR officials who register the harvested deer, and with the charity organizations that receive venison. In addition to learning from the experience of Mr. Strand, the committee plans to invite Brad Koele to attend committee meetings and a public hearing in the spring of 2008. Educating La Crosse residents on the need for deer abatement, on the measures undertaken to assure public safety, and on the successful track record of urban hunts in other Wisconsin cities, is vital to the successful development and implementation of an urban deer management plan.

Gar Amunson, the superintendent of parks and recreation, will draft the urban deer management plan, revise the plan according to input from DNR consultants and committee members, and coordinate the logistics of implementing the approved plan.

Plan or Project Completion Timetable

Pending the City Council's decision (on December 13th) to allocate \$5,000 in municipal funds to match a DNR grant for the development of an urban wildlife management plan, the Deer Control Sub-committee will begin a series of regular meetings, starting in January and continuing through the winter, spring and summer of 2008. We will coordinate our meetings with the schedules of DNR wildlife biologists so that these experts may visit La Crosse, tour the La Crosse Bluffland Preservation Area, and share their experience on deer abatement measures. Our goal is to complete an urban wildlife management plan by late summer of 2008, to receive City Council and DNR approval of the plan by October of 2008, and to begin implementing the plan by November of that same year.